

TechArcheology 2000
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Main, NAMAC (Winter 2000)

On January 5 and 6, 2000, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art hosted “TechArcheology: A Symposium on Installation Art Preservation.” This gathering was billed as an “opportunity to significantly advance the development of conservation practices for technology-based installation art.” The approximately 25 invited participants included conservators and curators from the Getty Conservation Institute, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, The Tate Gallery, The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pacific Film Archive, and SFMOMA, as well as four important installation artists: Dara Birnbaum, James Coleman, Gary Hill and Steve McQueen. Using the exhibition on view at SFMOMA, “Seeing Time: Selections from the Pamela and Richard Kramlich Collection of Modern Art,” participants conducted in-depth case studies of several installations, then shared their findings with the greater symposium.

This new century, the next century of media arts began on a promising note: a conference organized by Sally Jo Fifer (BAVC), Mona Jimenez (IMAP) and Paul Messier (Boston Art Conservation) addressed the conservation of media art, focusing specifically on installation work intimately tied to technology. Though much thinking about this conservation issue has occurred as a matter of necessity within institutions that are acquiring and exhibiting electronic media, rigorous discussions have not taken place in a formalized context. TechArcheology, as the gathering was named, brought together the differing outlooks, disciplines and skills of museum professionals - namely conservators, curators, preparators, and technical specialists - as well as a group of prominent artists.

Without getting into the minutiae of the conference’s structure, let me say that TechArcheology attempted to clarify, or at least broach, several key aspects of media art conservation. First, what is at the core of an individual work - in other words, what can be extracted or modified within a media installation without altering its intent? Second, what kind of documentation is necessary to establish a measure of this intent to insure accurate re-stagings in the future? And finally, what role must the artist play in creating an authoritative schema to guarantee the faithful exhibition of his or her work in perpetuity?

Much of the above discussion proceeded without direct reference to the substantial body of standards and protocols already underpinning conservational practice. But as the two-day intensive conference drew toward a close, it became clear that conservators indeed could rely on many pre-existing procedures for quantitative analysis of an installation. This orderly taxonomy could quantify (for replication or repair) the components of an installation, like light levels, color values, audio levels, architectural dimensions and relations, which provide the basis for exacting documentation. Add to this the thoughtful testimony of the artist regarding intentions and their corollary technical requirements, and the conservator could refer to a well-nuanced blueprint of a complex artwork.

It was also clear by the end of the conference that the status of electronic technology (and to a lesser degree moving image media, such as slides, films and videotape) was still absolutely problematic. Considerable time was spent discussing the migration of media in order to simplify exhibition: for example, film to tape and tape to dvd. There was much speculation about unforeseen technical developments and how they might aid with future re-installations. But these discussions were couched in a narrow context - perhaps purposefully so - that avoided central questions concerning the aesthetic and historical nature of technology within art. What exactly is the relationship (and specificity) of that particular film strip, that particular VCR, that particular projector, that particular set of cables, that particular switcher to the substance of the installation?

The fortuitous title, TechArcheology, presents a good starting point for how art - and in this case media art - could be considered a sub-category of archeology, the study of the material remains of human activity. Further, like archeological findings, art objects reflect the conditions of a specific historical moment, its technical possibilities, its cultural fixations.

Technology has always influenced the eventual form of art. This can be seen in the means of production, where an evolving apparatus such as a kiln or foundry, shapes the outcome of an artist's creativity. Or where the more overt materials before the viewer's eyes, such as pigments, glazes or bases, anchor the work in a history of art-specific possibilities. Even systems of technical thinking like the mathematics that account for perspective, lend an undeniable causation; or similarly the advances in meteorology that changed the representation of clouds in 19th century landscape painting. Is there not an active partner in the creation of music? And what of the simple motors in the kinetic sculptures of Tinguely? Is there not a concrete character to their charged tubes and herky-jerky rotations?

But what are we to think of the special case of contemporary media art, art conspicuously linked to its technological parentage? The fact that the work of art incorporates technology, whether visibly or covertly, does not diminish its status as a cultural and historical object, rather it serves to heighten its direct anchorage in historical specificity. The technological particulars of a time, the available resources of the artist, the frictions between aesthetic aspiration and technical exigency, the cultural assumptions and prejudices surrounding technology glance off of the specific usage within any electronic work of art. Because technology is by invention part of an evolving continuum, the distinct medial qualities; the limitations, the flaws, the revisions - at any point along that progression color the work in unexpected and subtle ways.

Electronic devices produce, alter and deliver visual images in idiosyncratic ways that add subjective measure to technical specifications (ie. Sony color is warmer than JVC color). Resolution is visible; analog differs from digital; reflected light differs from emitted light. Even technical inadequacies are translated into beloved aesthetic strategies as seen in the use of products like Pixelvision. The on-site presence of the devices themselves, along with their industrial design and materials, evoke aspects of an era with a mix of authenticity, nostalgia and distance.

What we have are the technological components influencing the experience of a media installation in differing ways: as subtle colorations, marked by grains, textures, resolutions, stabilities and other characteristics, and as blatant sculptural elements continually foregrounding

the time of their manufacture and fetishized use. In some cases, you could argue that the technological components articulate the installation. Their timbres and sonorities are mistaken for the voice of the artist.

What I have avoided addressing altogether are the self-reflexive and deconstructive intentions of many media works. Here, the interrogation of the technology underscores not just its physical presence, but the broader cultural implications of the apparatus as well. With works of this nature, you could say that they are tamper proof when considering the specificity of electronic devices.

If any of the above arguments have validity, they should be seriously considered before choosing to modify the technological aspects of an installation. Yet the impulse to alter these integral components was almost cavalierly expressed by conservators, by curators and by the artists themselves throughout the TechArcheology conference. The explanations for this injudicious leap are manifold, convenience not being the least of them. Ease of presentation and the minimizing of maintenance resounded like institutional mantras, while the dread of caring for outmoded and cumbersome equipment cast a dark pall over the proceedings. Another tacit reason for the willingness to substitute and update hardware was the salability of the object. Purged of archaic equipment, an “older” installation immediately becomes more attractive to collector and museum alike.

If one were to be generous, one could say that the demands of caring for expanded forms of contemporary art have presented the museum with unprecedented and daunting challenges. The duskier view, on the other hand, would deem that the museum wants to exercise acquisition without the appropriate stewardship, without the resolve to change as the art has.

There is no doubt that the museum cannot be all things to all forms of art. The guardianship of expanded forms of media art requires specialized areas of expertise, arcane technical facilities, and a need to update one’s knowledge of the field at an accelerating pace. Then too, the level of vigilance and support brought to bear during exhibition is unlike any of art’s antecedents. Though the details of care and display may fundamentally change, the responsibilities of stewardship do not. Regardless of their material components, as unusual and unsightly as they may be, these media works remain profound cultural objects.

What might ease the burden of responsibility is a national effort to warehouse and refurbish outmoded technologies, to amass technological documentation, and, perhaps, most importantly to preserve and encourage suitable skills among the coming generations of engineers, technical conservators and tinkerers. Old-fangled technologies, from zoetropes to wax cylinder players, from film strip projectors to open reel VCRs, could be studied, renovated and databased. The faculty to appreciate out of date devices could be cultivated, and the machinery itself serviced and dispersed. We could call this place the Institute for Archaic Technology.

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